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ABSTRACT

For more than two thousand years, the painted image has been critical to the culture of the West. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, painting sits quietly in a small corner and is, for the most part, ignored. Museums increasingly devote their contemporary exhibition space to "installation art," as opposed to discrete objects such as sculptures or paintings. Contemporary private galleries are the same. To answer the question of whether painting still matters without resorting to platitudes about art and beauty, the case for abstract painting must be made first. Making the case for abstract painting will lead to looking at the meaning and structure of painting, rather than its changing subject matter. This fastback sometimes will include a discussion of all painting, or painting in general. It looks at painting in history to arrive at the relevance of painting in the contemporary world. (BT)

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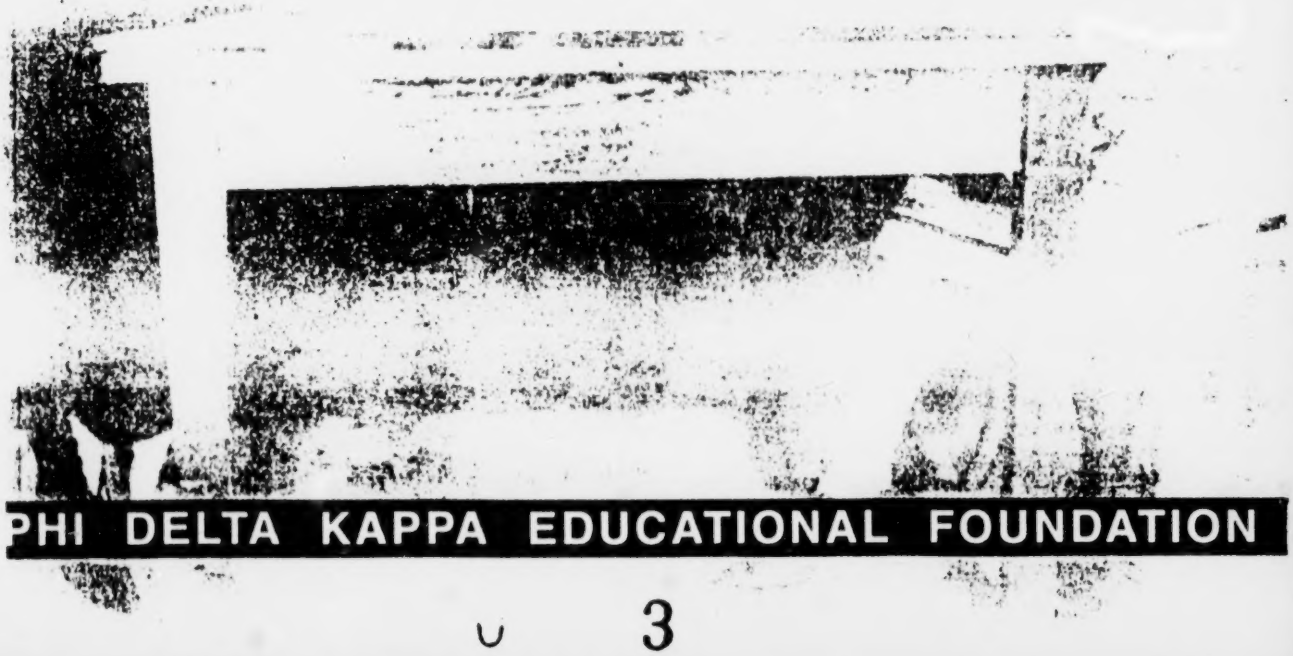
Laurie Fendrich



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Laurie Fendrich

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Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Why Painting Still Matters

by
Laurie Fendrich

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1

For more than two thousand years, the painted image has been critical to the culture of the West. Aside from the relatively brief battle over images in the 8th and 9th centuries, the Byzantine and Latin churches overwhelmingly embraced painting and provided the major source of patronage for painters up through the Renaissance. That painting took a secular turn in the 16th and 17th centuries, which altered who paid for paintings, did not change its importance in the culture. Painting continued holding its powerful cultural sway right up through the heyday of Modernism in the early 20th century.

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, painting sits quietly in a small corner and is, for the most part, ignored. To take just two prominent examples: The competition for the Turner Prize, in Britain, and the Hugo Boss Prize, handed out by the Guggenheim Museum, essentially pushes aside painters in favor of performance, video, or installation artists. Museums increasingly devote their contemporary exhibition space to "installation art," as opposed to discrete art objects such as sculp-

tures or paintings. Contemporary private galleries are the same. They, too, frequently show installations that combine varying degrees of photography, video, sound, and new media, often with a hip, conceptual bent or an interactive component. Young artists, in trying to gain a little attention in the art world, eschew painting. If they do paint, their subject matter tends toward the politics of sexual or cultural identity, a self-conscious examination of the act of painting itself, or an ironic riff on the art of painting. There are exceptions, to be sure. Sincere, hard-working painters — young ones, at that — still exist. But it is not an exaggeration to say that in the culture at large, and the contemporary art world within that culture, painting has been marginalized; it is a wallflower at the Postmodern art party.

To many artists, painters and non-painters alike, it is quietly acknowledged that painting's impact on the culture is nil. Painting is seen, at best, as an esoteric activity for a few diehards living in the past. At worst, it is considered destructively elitist, part of the "oppressor culture" of dead white European males. The general public — attached to movies, television, and computers — barely registers painting as having anything relevant to say. The only question left, then, is whether there is any audience at all for contemporary painting and, if there is, how to preserve it.

Does painting still matter? To answer this question without resorting to platitudes about art and beauty, it helps to turn to the most difficult to understand and seemingly irrelevant kind of painting that exists — abstract painting. Questions about the meaning of paint-

ing and why anyone should continue to make paintings, when so many more visually powerful media are available, come to the fore by explicitly making a case for abstract painting — which is about the flat reality built from color, surface, shape, traces of the hand, mistakes, and changes. Figurative painting shifts the discussion about relevance over to one of technology. In other words, a defense of the continued relevance of abstract painting prevents the argument from becoming a technical one about how best to generate a "realistic" image of whatever subject is at hand — a squabble between artists advocating the slow, handmade, expensive painting and those endorsing the quick and inexpensive photographic or computer-generated image.

Making the case for abstract painting will lead us to look at the meaning and structure of painting, rather than its changing subject matter. Even so, because abstract and figurative painting share a history, what follows will sometimes include a discussion of all painting, or painting in general. In the end, abstract painting's continued vitality rests on its strong ties to the whole history and tradition of painting. As an aside, it should be noted that this discussion restricts itself to painting in Western culture because abstract painting, and the tradition of easel painting out of which it emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, are peculiar to that culture.

2

Unfortunately, mustering an effective defense of abstract painting at this point is about 90 years too late. A mistake was made in 1913, when it should have been tackled head on. That was the moment Duchamp began producing his "readymades," his ordinary mass-produced objects chosen from everyday life and then presented to the art viewer as sculptures. Duchamp threw down the gauntlet. He was directly challenging painting — "high art" painting and, by implication, all "high" art — by giving up painting and producing instead the "readymades." Hidden within the lighthearted snow shovel and bottle rack was a bloody thrust. Duchamp was playing out the end game of modern art by exposing the lack of any philosophical justification for a border between "high" art objects and objects chosen at random from our daily life. Duchamp's challenge was more radical than a simple attack on the "high" art of, say, Cubism, compared to the "low" art of an advertisement in the newspaper. For in the deliberately bland selection of his readymades, Duchamp hunted for the absolutely neutral object, one that would have no esthetic effect at all. There was to be nothing in

the look of the thing that made you think, "You know, when you come to think of it, that bottle rack actually is a good-looking object."

Painters made a tactical error in response to Duchamp. (Or perhaps they just did not understand his threat, because they were busy with their own aesthetic revolution.) They more or less ignored him for the next 50 years, dismissing him as an aesthetic gadfly and remaining willfully oblivious to the deeper implications of his gambit. The pretense worked until the painting edifice cracked and fell apart, like the toppling of Humpty Dumpty, under the attack of pop art. Pop turned out to be the belated 1960s wakeup call to the subversive implications in the work of Duchamp.

Many people in the arts have written about the second half of the 20th century as the end of Modernism and the onset of "Postmodernism." Whether we are in a truly new age that needs its own new name or simply experiencing an extension of Modernism, a "turn on Modernism," or an "old age" of Modernism, something did indeed change during the 1960s and 1970s that makes us speak of what followed as *different*. As the art critic Kim Levin wrote more than 20 years ago, "Modernism had gone out of style."[1] She meant that while no one inside Modernism was able to perceive it as just another style, after the 1970s people talked about Modernism and modern art as if they were part of a historical period, like all the other art historical periods from cave painting to the Impressionists.

All of the things that had been at the exhilarating and beautiful core of Modernism from its very start, and that

were manifested in painting — the invention of new forms, the willing embrace of discoveries about subtle ambiguities at the heart of existence, the belief in originality, the fear of chaos, the celebration of freedom (even the knot of anxiety tied to that thrill of freedom) — were rejected. From the middle of the 20th century onward, artists have been onto something else, and painting is not a significant part of it.

Ann Hamilton, the United States representative to the 1999 Venice Biennale, is a good example of the new kind of non-painting artist. An artist of international stature with a MacArthur grant behind her, Hamilton often makes her work, slowly, in front of a continuously changing audience — she gives a "performance piece" — while at the same time producing an "installation" (or at least a pile of objects that often is called simply a "piece").

Hamilton's work is a microcosm of what everyone means when they talk about the end of Modernism. There is a seemingly infinite number of artists making art more or less like this — in this genre. They are not peripheral to the art world but are, in fact, mainstream artists showing in galleries and museums and international art fairs around the world. Much of this art, which is broadly labeled "installation art," combines theater, sculpture, painting, photography, video, and computers. Whether it is good or bad is not the point — some of it is extraordinarily good. The point is, it is all the enemy of painting.

Whether or not Kim Levin was right in saying that we are truly in a postmodern age, it is clear that some-

where in the middle of the 20th century there was a change that hit hard at believers in Modernism and especially hard at abstract painters. The notion of "high art" has taken a severe beating over the years, beginning with Duchamp's witty jabs in the 1910s and 1920s and culminating in pop art's all-out assault in the 1960s. As a result, defenders of high modern art, especially as it has been manifested in abstract painting, are now dismissed as not just irrelevant, but elitist.

The age of deconstruction, in which all things fell apart in a frenzy of celebration, invaded the art world in the 1960s and 1970s and flowered in the succeeding decades. It altered the intellectual and aesthetic taste of modern artists from what it had been for the previous hundred years. Deconstruction taught artists to prefer flexibility and fluidity to universal truth, to like slippage, "contextualized meaning," a multiplicity of equalized "texts," uncertainty, continuous flux in meaning, the "gap" in meaning, no meaning, and overt, flippant irony. Artists and critics probed the remains of what had once divided "high" art, such as painting, and "low" art, such as cartoon illustration or advertising. It became exciting to apply critical aesthetic thinking to movies and car advertisements. The writing about art began to change. Articles and essays began to include such words and phrases as "reification," the "registering a cross-referencing of discursive possibilities," "sexual identity," and "breaking down boundaries." And deconstruction bees spread their pollen over even such conservative critics as Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of the *New York Times*. On the last day of 1996, the

Times published a front-page article by Kimmelman telling us that the Calvin Klein and Gap billboard ads in Times Square — and not, by implication, such stately "high art" works as Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' War Memorial in Washington, D.C. — were the real public art of our times.

More significant than the collapse of any distinction between high and low art is the relation of contemporary artists to the history of art. After the 1960s many, if not most, young artists trying to get a rung up on the art-world ladder ceased to care about their possible link to the tradition of painting in the West. In fact, except for the brief fashion for discovering one's genealogical "roots," they no longer were interested in seeing history as something to belong to or to be a part of or to carry forward.

This attitude toward history held sway in the successive decades. Although many young, nonwhite artists refer to their racial heritage in their art, the issue for them is more identity than aesthetics. The point is, most young artists (whatever their race or sex) prefer to see history, especially art history, as a massive amount of information that at times is useful for rummaging around in for ironic references but mostly is a pain in the neck and best ignored. The prevailing view is that today is the point in Western history that has the "most advanced" outlook on everything. Artists have no inkling or concern that they might be Bernard of Chartres' dwarfs sitting atop huge giants who have come before them. And they have no desire to imagine what it was like to be in another time in Western culture, instead

projecting all their jumbled modernist and postmodernist ideas onto other ages and even other cultures.

This represents an enormous change from the way artists in the West had seen themselves for more than 500 years. From the Renaissance on, right through Abstract Expressionism, artists from one generation to the next, not to say one century to the next, saw themselves simultaneously as direct descendants of and direct challengers to the artists who preceded them. The point is not that artists were scholars and historians, but that they had an awareness of the greatness that came before them.

3

To begin a defense of painting's contemporary relevance, it is necessary first to toss overboard some excess baggage. In the early 1960s the iconoclastic painter Ad Reinhardt, who was erudite enough to teach Asian art history at Hunter College, offered a daring route out of the morass of Abstract Expressionism.[2] Reinhardt thought that the claims of personal expression, existential freedom, and revolutionary aesthetics in all that paint-flinging in the 1940s and 1950s was therapeutic poppycock. In order to give painting back its dignity (without resorting to painting pictures of dignified people) he thought it necessary to set forth, both in his own paintings and in a series of "dogma" writings, exactly what abstract painting is *not*. In order to clear the ground of unreasonable expectations for abstract painting, here are four assertions — in the spirit of Ad Reinhardt — about what abstract painting is not.

First, abstract painting is not a vehicle for social or political change, even if its pioneers thought it was. Robert Hughes correctly assessed things when he wrote that the only painting in the 20th century that had a sig-

nificant political impact was Picasso's *Guernica*.[3] Today, even more than in Reinhardt's day, if even a figurative artist paints a picture that argues a particular social or political point of view, its impact — in a society flooded with photographs, movies, television, video, and computers — is ridiculously small. The possibilities are even fewer with abstract painting.

Second, abstract painting is not avant garde. It was in 1915, but it isn't any more. Technologically, painting is both ancient and simple. In terms of its ability to shock anybody — the rallying cry of the now defunct avant garde — painting today is feeble when compared to the power of other media. The idea of painting as an avant garde art died in the 1960s, under the attack of both pop art and Minimalism. More to the point, shocking anybody in a culture that subsumes the shocking under the category of the expected exposes the fact that the whole notion of the avant garde is outworn.

Third, abstract painting has never been, and most likely never will be, widely popular. Abstract painting is clearly not for everyone. Its pioneers — Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian — all held utopian hopes for its eventual universal appeal, but they were proved poignantly wrong. Abstract painting turned out to be too subtle, too self-referential, too slow, too demanding of the viewer's patience, and too easy to poke fun at ever to attract a mass audience. (On the other hand, paradoxically, abstraction has been enthusiastically absorbed into corporate lobbies and CEO offices and functions powerfully as a sign, even to the uninitiated, that the company is successful, "with it," and modern.)

Finally, abstract painting cannot offer much of what we call "Deep Hidden Meaning" in the way that religion or philosophy can. Put bluntly, it cannot provide a substitute for God, the loss of whom is the earmark of Modernism. Indeed, its ability to move people to tears is weaker than that of music, theater, novels, or poetry.

On the other hand — to continue in a more moderate, but no less passionate spirit than that of Reinhardt — here are some things that abstract *can* do:

First, it offers what we might call "Little Hidden Meaning." To a viewer who can look at a still image (for some, a difficult task, given the glut of hyper-moving images in our culture) and who is knowledgeable enough (not a scholar, just a reasonably educated adult) to place the painting in a context of modern art as a whole, abstract painting offers a *de facto* philosophical point of view on life. It does not prove that view, but it offers it. There is a mistaken notion, coming from our lingering attachment to Romanticism and from our own narcissistic age, that abstraction is always about self-expression. In the broadest sense it is, of course, but it is also about ideas — the complex struggle between order and chaos, for example, or how the flux of the organic world modifies the rigor of geometry.

Second, abstract painting can enable us to be quiet. In the 1989 François Truffaut movie, "The Little Thief," a character brought a roomful of people dancing wildly to rock 'n' roll to a standstill by bellowing at them to be quiet so that he and his wife could dance a slow waltz. Abstract painting makes for a quiet room in the arts, al-

lowing for a slow waltz. And in the larger culture, abstract painting offers a retreat from the post-industrial world of cyberspace that is stuffed to the gills with information.

Third, abstract painting offers a counter to our society's glut of *things.* An abstract painting is itself a thing, of course, a part of the material world. But it reminds people of a world without things, and it is a reminder that there is an underlying, constant order that the transience of life's things cannot affect. Compared to televisions, computers, movie projectors, CD players, billboards, and even magazines, it is a terribly low-tech piece of goods. In terms of the possibilities for profound expression relative to the technology required, an abstract painting is one of the most culturally efficient goods on earth. Summed up in even the smallest rectangles are varying philosophies and references to history, geometry, and nature.

Fourth, abstract painting often, quite simply, is beautiful — though that assertion is subject to tremendous dispute. Artists since the birth of Modernism have substituted the pursuit of truth for the pursuit of beauty — truth in perception, truth in form, truth in materials. Many artists are rightly suspicious of the very idea of the beautiful, because it so easily petrifies into some rigid standard. Once locked into place, "beauty" obliterates the wide array of subtle variations within it. In addition, politics surrounds beauty, making the subject difficult to discuss directly. For many, notions of the beautiful are simply "cultural constructs," used by dominant cultures to suppress "the Other." Most problematic of all, folded up and hidden within the notion

of beauty are conflicting values. Beauty implies an inequality in the way things look. If there is beauty, there is ugliness and everything in between. That kind of ranking offends our democratic sense of justice, because we moderns have defined justice as that which most closely approximates equality.[4]

A fifth virtue of abstract painting is that it is not a story, particularly not one from the most readily accessible side of culture. We are bombarded by endless stories — in television shows, advertisements, novels, movies, and virtual-reality games. We constantly are teaching and preaching, persuading and dissuading by telling stories. While many nonabstract painters have inserted stories or "narratives" into their paintings, abstract painting resists narration and presents itself all at once, as a whole or a oneness that cannot, and never will, tell a story.

A final virtue of abstract painting is its very uncamera-like, uncomputer-like nature. The camera is so powerful that many people have reached the point where they can see the world only photographically or cinematically and have lost the ability to see it in other ways. Before long, people may see the world only digitally.

What abstract painting offers us as we begin our new century is, in sum, a useless nonstory, a nonblinking "thereness," without reference to anything other than itself and its own tradition. It defies translation into data, information, entertainment, rational image, or any kind of narrative. It presents an ineffable balance of sensation, experience, and knowledge. In the midst of a

world in which everything we see is instantly on its way to becoming something else — where "morphing" is as natural as natural movements — abstract painting is one of the few things left that allows us to see the possibility of something remaining constant.

4

If the virtues of abstract painting ascribed to it above are indeed true, then why isn't there more interest in this art? How did painting — not just abstract painting — arrive at the point where it is such a minor cultural player? To understand how this happened, we must look at the last 500 years of Western painting, beginning with the Renaissance. This long perspective allows us to tell the story of how abstract painting came up the river, so to speak, docked in the main urban capitals of the West, and then capsized. Abstract painting did not emerge in a vacuum. It began with a violent, deliberate breaking off of its roots in traditional Western painting. Today, paradoxically, its continued viability depends on reconnecting itself to those roots.

Because most people before the advent of movable type were illiterate, artists were critical to the Church in bolstering Christian faith in the West. To do this, the artist tried to convey the "likeness" of the real world. The big break in conveying "likeness" occurred in the quattrocento, when Italian painters, following the Flems, began to make panel paintings with oil (as opposed to tempera). This allowed them to achieve more

fluid transitions in the modeling of form. Leonardo's experiments in oil painting and his studies of light led to vivid descriptions of both three-dimensional form and the particularity of individual surfaces. From the invention of oil painting on canvas — by the Venetians in the late 15th century — until the modern age, the understanding of how to make illusion work in painting advanced continuously.

Raphael's painting, as do many works from the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, represents a kind of baseline realism. Raphael displays the discoveries of Renaissance art — linear perspective (which may have been known to the ancient Greeks and then lost, because their wall paintings, like the colors on their sculpture, did not survive the elements), modeling of volume, accurate rendering of human anatomy, and a system (albeit a flexible one) of designing and composing the picture. Although Raphael obviously is not unexpressive, the deliberate personal expression of the artist is secondary to the cultural expression of his society's religious beliefs.

Even when the artist's work is psychologically penetrating, and when the paint takes on a fantastic formal invention on its own terms as in, say, Rembrandt's work, the presence of a recognizable image from the real world remained absolutely essential to painting. The 17th century painter Rembrandt was beholden not to the Church but to his rich clients. For almost 400 years — from about the last third of the 15th century to the last third of the 19th century — painting lived near the center of Western culture, almost on a par with philosophy, religion, and

literature. The movers and shakers of the world in the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and most of the 19th century wanted to own paintings. Successful painters enjoyed direct contact with wealthy priests, kings, aristocrats, and, starting with the Dutch of Rembrandt's time, merchants. Painters came up in the world compared to their lower "craftsman" status before the Renaissance.

By the time we get to such artists as Tiepolo in the 18th century, illusionism had become rather old hat. An extraordinary number of painters could do in paint feats that would have dazzled the early-Renaissance pioneer "realist," Giotto. By the mid-19th century, middling painters in the French salons could impress audiences with their skills at illusionism, translating their perceptions of the three-dimensional world of form onto the two-dimensional world of a painting by using all the inventions — overlap, proportion, linear perspective, atmospheric perspective, color perspective, chiaroscuro, sfumato, and so forth. There really were few tricks of replication left to be discovered in painting. For a painter to be successful in the French art market of the 19th century, he needed only to master an established list — albeit a long list — of discrete skills.

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5

But the 19th century was to see an irrevocable change in painting, not just in the subject matter and the way the subject matter was painted, but in the artist himself and what he or she wanted to paint. This change, which we call Modernism, came about for two main reasons: first, the invention of photography in 1839 and, second, the upheaval in philosophy.

The invention of photography allowed anybody, even someone who had no drawing or painting skills, to fix an image of the real world onto a flat surface quickly and accurately, according to the appearance of reality as light falls across objects. This meant that the painter with his dazzling talent, his extraordinary skills, his special status as high-end commodity-maker for the rich, suddenly looked a little irrelevant, outmoded, and slow in his method of replicating the appearance of reality. More important, photography threw into question the whole *raison d'etre* of painting. If the camera was recording the world objectively through light rays bouncing off objects, painting, by comparison, looked fictive. Put a camera in a fixed position with fixed lighting on the same subject, let 100 different people click the shutter,

and you get 100 identical photos. Put the same-sized canvas on an easel in place and let 100 different painters paint the view, and you get 100 very different paintings. Painting looked unconvincing and artificial, and its artificiality was intensified by its 500 years of accumulated learning, or rules, which taught artists exactly how to go about making the artifice.

For centuries, oil painters essentially preconceived their paintings before they started to paint. Beginning with an underpainting of black, white, and gray or varieties of brown *(grisaille)*, they then added successive layers of glazed colors. The *cartoon*, a full-scale preparation for the final design of the painting, was often chosen as the first step and amounted to an architectural plan for the painting. Artists had to master a tremendous number of technical skills about the mixing and working of pigments, resins, oils, gessoed grounds, and the like. They had to know what colors could be safely applied on top of another and how long to allow things to dry. Technical mistakes could yield serious consequences (Leonardo's mural, *The Last Supper*, for example, began to show signs of deterioration almost as soon as it was completed.)

To be sure, there also were improvisational kinds of painting, such as *fresco* and *alla prima* painting. And there were frequent moments of improvisation in all painting. But for the most part, painting in the West was an art form in which artists planned their paintings and knew more or less what they would look like when finished. This nicely suited the basic economic foundation of painting, which was a painter-client relationship; the

client called the shots. There were frequent cases of downright meddling on the part of the client, both in terms of the materials used in the painting and the way the painting would look when finished.

All of this changed in the 19th century. The ancient poet Horace once said that the best art was that art which concealed itself, and this wisdom had informed Western illusionist painting for centuries. But with no surface differences, no traces of the hand, and no mistakes in the spatial logic, there was no two-dimensional medium that could conceal its means more than photography. Despite the array of tricks to create the illusion of reality on a flat surface, the 19th century exposed the Wizard of Painting for what he was. The camera pulled back the curtain on painting, revealing it to be intensely artificial.

The uncharitable interpretation of what painting did in the face of photography is that it cut and ran: from realism to an easier, more self-indulgent showcasing of self-expression through paint. The charitable interpretation is that painting realized it was now free to pursue a more profound reality than that of the mere surface appearance of the physical world. Perhaps it was some combination of fear and liberation that drove painters into the modernist revolution. In any event, the new modern painter turned his back on the traditional way to make a painting, along with the traditional understanding of what a painting ought to do or mean. Instead, the modern painter chose to look at what a painting really was, outside of its tricks of illusion and its religious or commercial intentions, and to face its reality as a flat object in a world of other objects. As the

post-Impressionist painter Maurice Denis said, "It is well to remember that a picture —before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote — is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[5]

The 19th-century birth of Modernism in art — essentially artists' pursuits of various versions of a more profound reality than mere illusionistic depiction of reality — came about during a profound general upheaval in the culture, which rejected artifice in favor of truth, especially the scientific truth of the new and powerful logical positivism. Even so, the most "scientific" of all the two-dimensional rendering media — photography — began by being intimidated by the great long tradition of painting — the *"high artness"* of it all — and so it struggled to imitate the compositional and painterly inventions of painting.

Painting reacted to the invention of photography and to the new age and its interest in science and progress by seizing the new "modern" love of objective truth. After painters accepted that a painting was nothing but swabs of color on a plane surface, they could agree on one important objective truth: All individual perceptions are true — at least to the perceiver — and therefore equally valid. Despite their individual stylistic differences, Impressionist artists in the 1870s and 1880s shared the conviction that it was the individual artist's vision that was objectively true, and it was this the artist should record when he painted.

To this new kind of artist, the "modern" artist, the artist's perceptions turned out to be what was important

all along. The new modern truth rejected preconceived ideas about how a painting should look or how it should be made or structured. That the truth to individual *perception* (Impressionism) would quickly broaden to include truth to individual *feelings* (Expressionism) did not change the fact that a major shift had occurred. It was a fundamental change in outlook that changed the look of art in the modern age. It was a change from aesthetic *effect*, which relied on artifice — that is, faking, telling lies — to aesthetic *intent* (or "sincerity"), which relied on telling the truth, understood by artists as being sincere.

6

What, in this kaleidoscope of individual "truths," would become of beauty? After Darwin and Freud, artists would not concern themselves with beauty, except as a byproduct, or an aside, as they manipulated form. It became nearly impossible for artists to hold onto ideas of beauty or love in the face of the powerful new mechanistic understanding of life as driven by natural selection and sex. Broken down into their component parts by the relentless eye of scientific scrutiny, beauty and love lost their vital meaning and dissolved into illusions, rather than truths.

Philosophy, influenced by the increasing power of science, tried to come forth with a solution to prevent the destruction of beauty. It would protect beauty by separating it from deadly scientific analysis and would leave it as a "subjective" judgment. It would do this by separating scientific facts from moral and aesthetic values. Philosophy, in other words, would no longer unify our experience of life. Instead, it would yield its primary position as objective interpreter of the world to science, which took off independently, leaving everything else behind, including poor philosophy, as sub-

jective rubble. That rubble reconstituted itself as the stuff of relativism — the idea that moral and aesthetic judgments are subject to continuous flux. Relativism had been around at least since Plato, of course, but the modern age marked the victory of the relativist position. Artists, no different from everyone else, were affected by this new outlook. It infused everything with an anxiety and uncertainty about what could be true other than scientific truth.

The postimpressionist painter Paul Cézanne, initially an Impressionist, rejected Impressionism because he thought it favored too much the transitory experience of perception at the expense of the real thing in the real world. With his inconsistent perspective (which Cézanne knew about and refused to correct) and his shifting points of view all occurring on the same picture plane, Cézanne shows us ways in which our knowledge of "what's out there" — our common sense about the real world or nature — ends in a terrible struggle with our perceptions. We fight hard to balance our constantly shifting perceptions, our "relativism" in perception, as it were, with our abiding, commonsense conviction that there is an objective, underlying, natural world beyond us. Cézanne grew increasingly anxious about the growing gap between his invented, constructed paintings and the natural world beyond. He fretted over the abstracting tendencies in his paintings because he feared that he was getting too far away from nature. Even so, his insistence on being true to his sincerely felt impressions, and being truthful to what he saw on the painting itself, led him to leave his abstractions in place.

His struggle yielded an awkward but nuanced balancing act of the nature he knew was "out there" with the truth of what he saw when he looked at it.

What thinking artist at the beginning of the 20th century would not have lost confidence in common sense and ordinary experience? Modern science and technology were able to defy common sense: They could send heavy objects up into the air and make them fly, or produce hundreds and thousands of multiples of the same object in a factory, or put together images in such a way that they created moving images, or movies. And modern history was about to produce two obscene world wars whose weapons of mass destruction would make a mockery of ordinary, common notions of decency and honor. Seen in this context, Cubism, which began in 1906 and lasted as a major force in modern art until the mid-1920s, is the aesthetic assertion of the doubt the artists had about the truth of our ordinary day-to-day assumptions. Cézanne's 19th century balance between commonsense knowledge, or ordinary experience, and scientific knowledge was tipped in favor of science. The commonsense experiences of human beings became the subject of continuous, ruthless assaults. This loss of confidence in the judgments from ordinary life, which began at the end of the 19th century, ended up permeating the whole century that was to follow.

At the beginning of the century, science made the radical discovery that things do not have *inherent* qualities. Rather, science seemed to say, the important point is to study the relations and connections of things. Cubism is the aesthetic manifestation of this scientific under-

standing. It was not, by any interpretation, an attempt to be an "illustration" of these scientific conclusions. But it did explore the relations of parts of things, abandoning the idea of ever expressing the things themselves.

In Cubism (which began with Picasso and Braque about 1906) mass and void become interchangeable, so that figure and ground became interchangeable. The viewer takes this deconstructed whole and tentatively pieces it back together. No reconstruction is superior to any other, and all reconstructions are fleeting. In other words, the meaning is driven by the viewer, whose job it is to put together a picture, albeit temporarily.

Cubism makes the viewer into a kind of artist, or at least a version of the artist, because the viewer has to do the work of finding the things themselves — the pipes, the bottles, the portraits of a poet or an art collector. The viewer becomes an active participant in viewing the picture. Indeed, the viewer, not the artist, is now explicitly responsible for completing the picture. The picture is pushed into the viewer's imagination. Cubism hovered on the verge of total abstraction but refused to go the whole way. The real world still lingers in the pictures, though fractured, in the form of hidden pipes, bottles, or noses.

7

Abstraction was invented suddenly, simultaneously, and on different fronts on the heels of Cubism. Very different artists were involved, certainly not all of them coming out of Cubism. But in all cases the intention of the revolutionary abstract artists was not to express *themselves* (except incidentally) but to invent a language that could express the new sensations of the new modern experience. This necessitated pictures in which the viewer would radically participate by putting together, in his head, the meaning of the picture.

The invention of abstraction made explicit what had been suppressed or hidden in illusionistic painting. All paintings, even those that are the most illusionistic, require that the viewer piece them together into something meaningful, as opposed to merely blobs of paint. The modern artist would not deliver an illusionistic picture because the modern artist, adhering to the new modern script of truth at all costs, did not believe in such deceits. And thus the viewer, no longer spoon-fed an illusion of reality, would have to work when looking at a picture.

Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian, even a dada artist like Schwitters — all were concerned at about the same

time (the 1910s) with abstract paintings that would make viewers seek and discover a profounder understanding of the underlying structure of man and his universe than they could get through looking at *pictures of things.* Most of these artists wanted to get away from "things" because, at the same time that the modern scientific revolution was abandoning believing that things have inherent qualities, the modern industrial revolution was starting to flood the world with things, thousands of things, especially mass-produced things. Abstraction, then, offered a way out of "things."

For the Russian Kasimir Malevich, the new mechanical engineering of the early 20th century offered possibilities for utopian social change, and his geometric abstraction was a route toward human salvation. His art was at first hailed by the Russian Revolution for its anti-bourgeois properties and then later, after Trotsky's departure, reviled by it. Malevich's endless and nearly incomprehensible writings and the complex internal formal properties of his abstractions make him one of the most mysterious and arcane artists in history. But it is not difficult to grasp that he had high hopes that his abstraction would help mankind improve itself by abandoning bourgeois values.

For the Russian Wassily Kandinsky, frequently in exile, his abstraction was a means to appeal to all men and women everywhere through what he deeply believed were universal expressive truths embedded in the emotive abilities of color and mark. Compared to Malevich, Kandinsky's ideas about art are much more accessible, even though he lays high expectations at the feet of color.

Piet Mondrian's intuitively painted geometric abstractions restricted themselves to the essential primary colors, along with white and black. To Mondrian, his paintings were an external manifestation of a harmony in the universe masked by the materiality of things. And for the dada artist Kurt Schwitters, his *merz* pictures were a way to reconstruct a world out of the trash of the modern world. His was an abstraction based on a disgust with the way things were, and he physically started over with what had been thrown onto the rubbish heap of Modernism.

There is no mistaking that abstraction was utterly utopian in its origins. At its most extreme, in Futurism, it even included what now strikes us as a fool's euphoria over the machine and war. But after its utopian birth, abstraction settled down for the next few decades into much less ambitious, personal, and private pursuits. Although much of it was initially cubist-derived, there also were abstract paintings that were fed by Matisse's expressionist decoration, Van Gogh's agonized faith in personal feelings, or, later on, Surrealism. Abstract painting was an island unto itself, capturing the intellectual imagination of critics and intellectuals. But it was surrounded by oceans of figurative painting — namely, Surrealism and the ideological art of all sides in World War II.

Painters in the mid-1940s, for a variety of reasons, began to formulate a new kind of abstraction that fused several forces. Among the most compelling forces driving the engine that would end up being called Abstract Expressionism was the tremendous freedom it offered

artists to express and escape simultaneously the historical disaster of the middle of the 20th century. To paint sincere inner feelings seemed a credible response to an existentially despair-filled modern world trying to come to terms with the Holocaust and the atom bomb. Abstract Expressionism became the vehicle for painters to probe their most individual feelings, to use the mark of the brush as a tracing of their wounded psyches. The idea was that viewers would be able to decode these feelings by looking at the results lying on the canvas.

In the end, this placed an impossible burden on the viewer, a greater burden than that placed on the viewer by Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian combined. These early revolutionaries had pinned their abstraction on universal ideals, which in theory, at least, could be understood by anyone. Their art was only incidentally about their personal feelings. The abstract expressionists offered mostly their innermost feelings, which were so individually tormented that they could never be known by people on the outside.

In Abstract Expressionism, abstract painting reached the point where the most important aspects of interior individual human existence, which were the sincere intentions of the artists, were supposedly coupled with results on the canvas. This was too much for painting to sustain. Certainly it was too arcane for most viewers to understand, even with the help of interpreters. Abstract Expressionism ended as a symbol for modern art, rather than a ubiquitously deeply moving kind of art. The century had begun with the birth of abstract painting, believing it revealed universal truths that

could be understood by and would appeal to the sensitive viewer. But 40 years later, abstraction had turned into an esoteric activity for a small group of artists and viewers who could somehow "get" it.

8

There is nothing like the demolition power of irony, deftly directed, to tear down and mutilate sincerity. By the 1960s abstract painting was at an inflated high, in both economic and psychological terms. Pop art burst the bubble. It did so indirectly by making fun — in its own celebration of "low" popular images — of abstraction's overreaching (if not downright pretentious) aspirations. Pop art represented the fruition of the seeds planted by Duchamp a half century earlier. Pop art simultaneously mocked and embraced the modern culture of "stuff," making the abstract painter's monkish and self-absorbed retreat from this subject look both elitist and silly.

Although pop art took place mainly on the canvas, it was a self-destructive kind of painting because its implied message was that it was the appropriated images that counted, not the way paint was put on the canvas. Painting had always been profoundly centered on the artist's "touch," along with the image. Now painting was centered on only the image. The pop artist's signature style was precisely that touch was obliterated and replaced by image and image alone. That is why it was

such a quick-hit kind of painting. It was really a short hop, skip, and jump from pop art to the end of the triumvirate of canvas, hand, and brush. Painting still had a market — it was bought and sold, it had its ups and downs — but a good deal of it was bought and sold like antiques: the older and rarer, the higher the price.

Minimalism didn't help things, either. This 1960s sculpture movement, adhering to highly reductive principles, celebrated sculpture as superior to painting because of its inherent resistance to illusion (sculpture was, after all, a real object in a world of real objects). With its crisp industrial clarity, its chrome, steel, and plexi, Minimalism looked fresh and contemporary. It turned Abstract Expressionism into a visual anachronism.

40

9

Nevertheless, abstract painting continued after pop art and Minimalism. Lots of painters had been educated by other abstract painters, and they believed deeply in the ability of abstraction to carry meaning. They were spending hours in their studios struggling with self-imposed abstract painting problems (usually some form of Abstract Expressionism) and they were not about to give up abstract painting because of the latest craze. Besides, they had teaching jobs in American universities and were flush with painting students.

But without their noticing it, painting itself had silently slipped to the side of the art world during the 1960s. Pop and Minimalism had been only the beginning, for there was an explosion of new art forms that began in the 1960s and flowered in the 1970s. More important, the art world itself, in the face of the general social revolution of the 1960s, the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and the rise of a photo-driven mass media, had shrunk in its importance to and effect on the culture as a whole.

Because of changes in the greater culture — from telecommunications to politics — after World War II, the culture turned into a full-blown "mass culture,"

wherein people's interests gravitate to the most readily accessible side of culture, for example, pop music, movies, sports, and celebrities. This readily accessible side of culture is so powerful that it smothers anything in its way. Painting was exhausted from trying to resist it. Its abstract expressionist battle to save serious meaning in the face of fickle consumer desire left it isolated and weakened. Only a few people cared any longer about this strange activity characterized by its slowness. Quick and readily accessible meaning does not figure in any kind of painting other than ironic painting.

What happened was inevitable. Young artists in the 1970s abandoned painting in droves, drawn to the new art forms of photography and video that seemed, in their speed, glitz, and technology, to reflect the culture at large more deftly and directly. Anything that carried the energy of the popular culture — the energy exploding in advertising, television, and movies — was more attractive than the relative quiet of painting.

10

For abstract painting to survive in the 21st century as something more than an esoteric hobby for the few — in other words, in order to have an effect on the culture — it must mount an offensive.

To begin, it must celebrate its convention-bound nature, rather than try to conceal it or apologize for it. Abstract painters work within a rectangle. They follow a century of developed traditions of abstract painting. The revolution itself — the early modern moment that invented abstraction — must have been electrifying; but that moment is forever gone. For contemporary abstract painters and their viewers, the experience is profoundly different from what it was for their revolutionary forebears. Abstract art is a quiet pleasure now, rather than a dizzying thrill. Its conventions are as firmly established as those in, say, baseball; and to derive pleasure from abstraction requires accepting its rules, rather than deconstructing them.

Abstract painters must become, philosophically speaking, difficult and even cantankerous. They must plunge back into the fray by deliberately and loudly removing themselves from the fray. They must proclaim

without shame that they make art that is a high art rooted in history and not a low art floating temporarily in the present. Abstract painters must separate themselves from popular culture and deliberately make art that resists or is against popular culture. Their job is to reconstruct classical philosophical truths in a contemporary visual language, rather than to revel ironically in the impossibility of universal truths.

The enemy of painters is not the populace, but the conglomerates that control the choices presented to the populace. To find a way out of the bog of mass culture is more possible when the route chosen looks strikingly different; and for this, abstract painting is perfectly designed. Abstract painting offers people a chance to leave mass culture without having to become monks or philosophers. For the person with a modest hunger for something else, the abstract painting stands as a David defying Goliath, not an ostrich stuffing its head in the sand.

Abstract painters have, from the beginning, been marked by their unshakable (if anxiety-filled) belief that abstraction is superior to figuration. They work in isolation to make their art, knowing it is "high" art, often believing it is the "highest" art.[6]

The vast history of painting had seemed the enemy to many artists in the modern age. What to do and where to go in the face of all of those paintings? Turning away from painting toward popular culture seemed a smart strategy. However, as artists increasingly moved toward art that makes reference to the commercial and popular culture, they have in turn crossed into it, becoming in-

distinguishable from it. In addition, many commercial art forms — from television ads to websites — are more seductive than the putative art that "appropriates" from these media. The Eastman Chemical plant in Kingsport, Tennessee, or the pilings off the promenade along the Hudson River in Lower Manhattan, to take two examples, are as interesting to look at as almost any contemporary sculptural installation in a public park. Breaking down the wall between high art and low art proved the easy part. Sustaining an art form in the ruins of that wall, an art form that can move people in a powerful way, is the hard part.

As the 21st century progresses, the photograph will increasingly lose its persuasiveness as a truth-teller. It will be not just digitally manipulated but digitally generated. This will lead us to the point where visual images will no longer be believed. The computer age closes in, and science picks away at our free will gene by gene. Abstract painting offers a taste of freedom. Unlike the photographic or digital image, it requires artists to create paint texture in real time. It lets viewers see space more broadly and more imaginatively than do the "choose-from-the-above-menu" choices.

Abstract painting is a painter's specific response to painting's particular artistic conventions, built up through history. To take just one example, oil paint offers the ancient possibilities of color depth, achieved through layering colors in glazes, something that pixel dots and laser prints cannot begin to duplicate. Most important, abstract painting offers one-of-a-kindness in an age of duplication and replication. In short, it preserves human

individuality in the face of a mass-culture world that compacts us into consumer clones.

Small as its audience may be, abstract painting can say something important about contemporary life, for it sets up a powerful moral parallel to the way in which we lead our lives.[7] Abstract painters don't start their paintings in a vacuum. Rather, they build on the foundation of historical abstraction and forever refer back to it. Individual paintings are the result of an accumulation of errors, wrong turns, corrections, and resolutions. Abstract painters paint the way we all lead our lives — building on and rebelling against the givens and the choices, the purposeful actions and the accidents. An abstract painting, then, offers the perfect visual metaphor for life.

11

Today people distrust history. They want to know who's doing the telling and why. They are convinced that knowledge is a smokescreen for power. Thus our new century risks losing interest in the immutable and the eternal, the ideas that have gripped the Western imagination since the ancient Greeks. Rather than search for the eternal, we have an insatiable taste for continuous change. We search for patterns within change only because we are obsessed with power, and we mistake this search for knowledge.

Unfortunately, today's art students are hastily thrown into the maelstrom of contemporary art. They are given a brief history of painting that leaves out the passion. And they frequently are persuaded that painting — all painting — is finished.

A more insidious problem is that many people in contemporary culture have labeled abstract painting as "elitist" and have used that term to disparage abstract art. Well, abstract art *is* elitist. But it also is, by its very nature, open to everybody and in that way is far less elitist than most multimedia installation art.

Some people, even some artists, will never "get" abstract painting. However, with a little help, most people can learn to understand abstraction; and of those who learn to understand it, a few will learn to love it. Good abstraction startles the eye by presenting it with something it does not immediately understand rationally. It offers a beautiful antidote to the many pressures of mass culture.

Before Postmodernism, painting was a very noisy part of Western culture. The culture seemed quiet, and painting attracted attention. Now the culture is the noise, and painting — especially abstract painting — attracts little attention.

The power of abstract painting is this: It is a world beautifully separate from our postmodern, materialistic, morphing, ironic, hip age. As such, it offers a dignified and elegant human pathway out of the cultural crisis at the beginning of the 21st century. It cannot change our culture, but neither can installation art, computer art, or new-media attempts at appropriation, no matter how smart and savvy they are. Abstract painting still is the most physically simple vehicle for conveying, in an aesthetically and emotionally satisfying way, the modern human being's struggle with the nature of reality.

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Notes

1. Kim Levin, "Farewell to Modernism," in *Theories of Contemporary Art*, edited by Richard Hertz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985).
2. Ad Reinhardt, "Art as Art," in *Art in Theory*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).
3. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 110.
4. Here I deliberately equate "we moderns" with Alexis de Tocqueville's understanding of the citizens of 19th century America. Clearly, politically speaking, democracy and Modernism share characteristics that are essentially interchangeable.
5. Maurice Denis, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, edited by Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 94.
6. In his 1954 essay, "Abstract, Representational and so forth," Clement Greenberg argues that abstraction's commanding presence in the 20th century does not prove its inherent superiority over figurative art but is simply the way things worked out. However, there is little question in my mind that abstract painters characteristically think abstraction is superior to figuration.
7. I am indebted to a former colleague of mine at Hofstra University, the late Michael Gordon, for this particular point.

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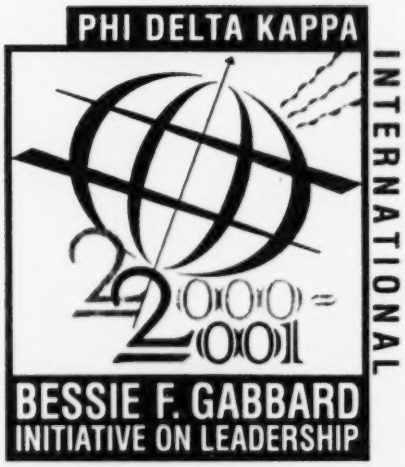

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